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THE STRATEGY ON THE WESTERN FRONT

II.

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OF course, at this time, no figures as to the strength of the armies on the Western front at various periods can be obtained with accuracy; nevertheless, an approximation, which will answer the purpose for an analysis and a discussion of the strategy on the Western front, may be obtained by a comparison of different estimates and statements.

It is generally admitted by both sides that at the battle of the Marne the Allies considerably outnumbered the Germans. *The Times History of the War, Vol. II*, page 51, estimates the Allies at rather more than 2,000,000 and the Germans at rather less than 2,000,000, and states that of combatants actually engaged in the battle there were probably 3,000,000 in all.

Lieutenant General Baron von Freytag-Loringhaven in his book, "*Deductions from the World War*," pages 90 and 91, says:

At the beginning of the war of 1914 the armed force of France alone was slightly in excess of the whole mobilized strength of Germany, while if we deduct the German forces employed in the East and those which were in the first instance kept at home for coast defence, the French, English and Belgians possessed a numerical superiority of something like three-quarters of a million men.

After the Battle of the Marne the strength of the field forces of the Allies on the Western front was increased and of Germany decreased up to September 1, 1915, when the numbers, according to the estimate of Frank H. Simonds in

the *American Review of Reviews* for October, were as follows:

	Allies	Germans
French	2,000,000	
British	750,000	1,500,000
Belgian	100,000	
	2,850,000	

But if such a great inequality in numbers between the Allies and the Germans did exist at that time, it was not continued long; for some time afterwards, but prior to the attack on Verdun in the following February, a number of German divisions were transferred from the Eastern to the Western front. Just how many is not accurately known, but probably about a quarter million of men. But, at any rate, it seems to be generally admitted that there was not a sufficient number transferred at this time to make Germany's strength on the Western front anywhere near equal to that of the Allies at the time of the attack on Verdun.

For a year and a half following the attack at Verdun, the Allies seem to have outnumbered the Germans by several hundred thousand; but the total collapse of Russia in November, 1917, permitted Germany to strengthen greatly her forces on the Western front early in the year 1918. On March 16, 1918, just five days prior to the great attack begun by the Germans towards Amiens, Colonel Slocum, Military Attaché at London, reported the number of combatant forces on the Western front to be:

	Divisions	Battalions	Rifle Strength	Artillery
British	58	555	600,000	5,892
French	97 ¹	915	764,000	9,806
American	4 ²	48	49,000	316
Belgian	6	108	64,000	598
Portuguese	2	24	26,000	68
Total Allies ...	167	1,650	1,503,000	16,680
Total Enemy ..	186	1,700	1,370,000	15,734

But evidently a number of German divisions that had recently arrived or were *en route* were not included in this

¹Two French dismounted cavalry divisions not included.

²There are 5½ American divisions in France; 3 or 4 referred to above are still under instruction.

report; for on May 25, Colonel Slocum reported the numbers as follows:

	Divisions	Battalions	Rifle Strength	Artillery
British	Omitted	495	520,000	6,247
French	103	904	674,000	10,103
American	5	60	65,000	458
Belgian	6	108	56,000	699
Italian	2	24	16,000	100
Total Allies . . .	166	1,651	1,331,000	17,607
Total Enemy . .	208	1,914	1,654,926	17,168

This would indicate that the Germans had a preponderance of trained fighting men on the line of about 300,000 on May 25; but this only takes into account 65,000 Americans out of more than 700,000 then in France. Of the 1,019,115 which Secretary Baker reported as having been sent to France prior to July, 1918, fully half were ready to take their places on the firing line by the end of August. In August, September and October nearly a million more men were sent to France; so that by November 1 there were nearly two million American soldiers in France, of whom probably one-half or thereabouts were ready to take their places on the firing line. All of which clearly indicates that the Allies have had a considerable preponderance of fighting men and guns on the Western front since July 1, 1918.

GERMANY'S SECOND GREAT MISTAKE

As a result of the battle of the Marne the German Army was halted, turned back, forced to dig in, and take up a defensive rôle which brought Germany's offensive on the Western front to an end for the time being. For about a year and a half she continued to act defensively there; and although she was considerably outnumbered by the Allies during this period, she held the front easily.

In the meantime she took the offensive in force against her enemies in other parts of the theatre of war. And having in these operations made a gigantic and successful campaign against the Russians and a marvelously successful one against the Serbians, she determined to make another powerful effort to break through the Western front and resume a war of movement.

Just why she changed her plan from the defensive to the offensive on the Western front before she had entirely disposed of her enemies in Russia, Serbia and Italy is not fully

understood. But the probable reason is that she felt the necessity of making another great effort there before Great Britain could complete the organization and training of her great army and make it ready for operations in France, which she was then engaged in doing. And since Germany's victories in the East and in the Balkans had greatly encouraged her and would enable her to transport a number of the veteran and victorious divisions of her Eastern armies to the Western front; and since the fall of the fortresses of Liege, Antwerp, and Maubeuge, resulting from the fire of the big Austrian and German guns, had demonstrated that fortresses in this war were of little account in the reckoning; and not knowing that the French had already absorbed this lesson and moved their great guns from their forts to concealed positions, she hoped to meet with better success this time in breaking through on the Western front. At any rate, she purposed trying it, and in February, 1916, began her great attack against Verdun.

This attack was one of the most sustained and formidable in history. For five months the German Crown Prince tried to break through the line at this point. In repeated and most desperate assaults, at the expense of enormous losses in life, he hurled his divisions against the French; but all his efforts were in vain. The line held. Verdun remained in possession of the French, and all the blood spilt by the German soldiers in that mighty effort went for naught.

And it was all a mistake, another great blunder; for with the same effort here spent, and probably a far less loss of life, Germany could in turn have completed her victories on the Eastern front, destroyed the army at Salonika, and captured that important sea port; then with greatly superior forces struck and crushed the Italian army; and then, with all her enemies disposed of outside of France and Belgium, have returned to the Western front with an enormous preponderance of forces, elated by great victories, for a campaign against her enemies there. And even had she not been able to do all this, she would have been able to do a great part of it; which would have brought her just that much nearer to a final victory, instead of having been brought, as she actually was, by her great failure and sacrifices at Verdun, just that much nearer to final defeat.

The two fundamental facts upon which all strategy is

based are, first, that an army in order to live and fight must have food, clothing, equipments, ammunition, weapons and reinforcements; and secondly, that these supplies and men must be brought to it over its lines of communication. These lines of communication running from its front to its bases of operation and supply are its nerves and its arteries and veins; sever them, and you destroy the army; even threaten them, and serious consequences are apt to follow. Hence it follows that the commander-in-chief of an army must ever keep a watchful eye upon them and be ever ready to protect them against any attack or threatened attack. But simply the protection of his own communications is not enough. If he expects to accomplish anything great in war, he must do much more than this: he must, if possible, so plan his operations, so direct his attacks, as to threaten or destroy his adversary's communications. It is then that a victory on the battlefield will bring with it momentous results.

But on the Western front it was impossible for either army to turn or outflank the other and strike its communications, since the fronts of each rested on the neutral country of Switzerland at one end and on the English Channel at the other. Hence it was by frontal attack only that either army could hope to break through and resume a war of movement; and since each was determined to prevent the other from breaking through, each constructed strong lines of intrenchments, with machine gun emplacements, wire entanglements, and other accessories.

The difficulty of breaking through these strongly entrenched lines was made more difficult by the employment on each side of the new war weapon, the aeroplane, which enabled the air scouts to sail over and beyond the enemy's line and to see and report any concentration of his forces. This knowledge enabled the commanding general of the opposing army to assemble his reserves opposite the threatened sector of his line in order to repulse the attack. In other words, the element of surprise, which in so many of the great battles of history has been such an important factor in determining results could not, as formerly, be made use of in the face of these new war weapons. Of course, the aeroplane has not entirely eliminated the chance of surprise, but it has made it, even in a small way, very difficult of attainment.

A glance at the map of the railways of Germany, France, and Belgium indicates that the most numerous and most important lines are those that traverse the country from east to west. Fourteen lines of track cross the Rhine between Switzerland and Holland. In addition to these main lines, two parallel lines on either bank of the Rhine follow its course north and south and many other cross lines connect the towns of the east and west lines with each other. In Germany the double track lines are much more numerous than in France and Belgium; some lines, indeed, having four parallel tracks. The chief difference between the countries is especially noticeable in the extraordinary development that the Germans had given to their connecting and crossing railways between stations and to platforms for loading and to the number of strategic railways near the frontier that they had built largely for purely military purposes.

The most important lines of communication of the combatant armies as they stood on the Western front from Belfort on the border of Switzerland, through Verdun, Reims, and St. Quentin to Nieuport on the English Channel were those several east and west railways which run from Paris in turn to Vienna, to Prague, to Berlin, and to Hamburg. They lie in a direction generally perpendicular to the Western front and cross the Rhine at Nuenberg, Breisach, Strassburg, Germensheim, Speyers (Speir), Manheim, Mayence (Mainz), Coblentz, Bonn, Cologne, Dusseldorf, Rheinhausen, Ruhrort, Wesel, and other places.

Numbered from the south, the main railways are:

First: The line from Paris to Vienna *via* Belfort, Mulhausen, Augsburg, and Munich.

Second: The line from Paris to Vienna *via* Chalons, Nancy, Strassburg, Carlsruhe, Stuttgart and Munich.

Third: The line from Paris to Prague *via* Chalons, Verdun, Metz, Saarbruck, Germensheim, Heilbron, and Nuremberg.

Fourth: The line from Paris to Dresden *via* Chateau-Thierry, Verdun, Metz, Mayence, Frankfurt, and Leipzig.

Fifth: The line from Paris to Berlin *via* Laon, Mezieres, Thionville (Diedenhofen), Treves, Coblentz, Giesen, Cassel, and Magdeburg. That part of this line which passes through the winding valley of the Moselle from Trionville to Coblentz is a strategic railway constructed

since the Franco-Prussian war of 1870. It joins the network of lines that the German military staff has built about Metz in the last few years and is the last in the series of communications by which Germany was able to penetrate France without traversing Luxemburg or Belgium.

Sixth: The line from Paris to Berlin *via* Laon, Mezieres, Maubeuge, Namur, Liege, Aix-la-Chapelle, Cologne, Barmen, Wehrden, and Magdeburg.

Seventh: The line from Paris to Berlin *via* Laon, Hirson, Maubeuge, Namur, Liege, Aix-la-Chapelle, Dusseldorf, Hamm, Magdeburg.

Eighth: The line from Paris to Berlin *via* Compiègne, St. Quentin, Maubeuge, Namur, Liege, Aix-la-Chapelle, Duisburg, Essen, Hamm, and Hanover.

Ninth: The line from Paris to Hamburg *via* Montdidier, Cambria, Mons, Charleroi, Namur, Liege, Aix-la-Chapelle, Wesel, and Bremen.

As to these last four lines it will be noted that all merge into one line in passing through Namur, Liege, and Aix-la-Chapelle; and that there is no other east and west line to the southward until the Mezieres-Sedan-Thionville railway south of the Ardennes mountains is reached.

Various important railway lines also connect the principal towns of France and Belgium with Calais, Boulogne, and other channel ports.

The Germans obtained their supplies, munitions and reinforcements over the railways extending eastward from the Western front into Germany; the French theirs over those extending westward and south-westward from the Western front to Paris, which was their great manufacturing and distributing center; and the English, theirs over those leading back from their lines on the Western front to Calais and Boulogne and other Channel ports. Supplies landed at Le Havre and Brest and a number of other French ports, for the use of the Allied armies, were mostly sent to Paris for distribution.

After America came into the war in April, 1917, other new lines of communication and supply were established for the American forces. They extended from behind the Western front in the vicinity of St. Mihiel, just south of Verdun, westward, southwestward, and southward across

France to the principal American points of debarkation at St. Nazaire, La Rochelle, Bordeaux, and Marseilles.

For three years and a half after the battle of the Marne, the line of the Western front separating the opposing armies in France and Belgium was, with the exception of a slight change made in it as a result of the battle of the Somme, practically stationary; and was in shape like that of an elongated letter S, the upper part northwest of Verdun, bulging towards Paris, the lower part southeast of Verdun, towards Strassburg. And such was the shape of the Western front when the great attack was made at Verdun.

Inasmuch as Verdun was one of the strongest points of the entire front, and well known to be such by the Germans, the question naturally arises why did the German General Staff select that point for attack, and why did they sacrifice so many men in repeated and fruitless efforts to break through the French front there?

The answer is, that the map shows that Verdun, and that portion of the French front just west of Verdun to Reims, was the only sector of the whole line where the Germans could by breaking through it cut off the communications of a large part of the French army with Paris. Strategically then this sector of the line was the place to strike.

It might appear that had the attempt been made to break through westward of Verdun, near Reims, it would have met with better success; but even so, in that case, so long as Verdun itself held out, it is evident that the break could not have been sufficiently widened to make it safe for a German army to pass through. In order, therefore, to carry out this plan successfully, it was absolutely necessary that Verdun itself be taken; and had it been taken, the gap towards Reims could have easily been widened.

It is evident that had this plan been successfully carried out, it would have produced momentous results; for a break through this sector of the line and an advance through Chalons and Troyon towards Troyes and Chaumont, would have severed the communications with Paris of the entire right wing of the French Army, which was occupying the line from Verdun to Belfort. Having broken through it, the Germans might have taken either of two courses: They

might have left a containing force¹ to hold the right wing of the French Army, while they moved westward with their remaining forces to envelop Paris; or they might have left a containing force to hold the French forces towards Paris, while they closed in with their remaining forces on the French right wing and captured it. They would probably have followed the latter plan, since the whole right wing of the French Army, with its communications severed and a powerful German force pressing it in front, could not have escaped capture. This accomplished, practically all the German forces in front of, as well as in rear of, the French right wing would then have been released to assist in enveloping and capturing the French forces about Paris.

The consequences of a German victory at Verdun would have been immense, for it would have meant the destruction of France, perhaps the conquering of the world. Thus it was that the Germans made such mighty efforts to break through the French front there. At first their formidable blows proved irresistible and led to the capture of a large part of the fortified area about Verdun and of the important outlying forts of Douamont and Vaux. And they were most persistent; again and again for a period of five months they brought their troops to the attack, until the very ravines ran red with blood. And it seemed as if they might succeed in spite of their immense losses; for they appeared ready and willing to sacrifice any number of men in order to gain a few yards of ground.

It was a critical period in the world's history; the outlook was portentous; free government was trembling in the balance. And to those who understood the strategy of the situation, the mighty assaults on Verdun filled their hearts with dread akin to despair, lest the Germans would break through and all would be lost. But the French soldiers, the indomitable French soldiers, inspired by their great fighter, Pétain, barred the way and hurled them back; and France was saved; and the friends of freedom once more took courage.

¹ "Containing Force": A body of troops charged with the duty of holding in check a body (generally numerically superior) of the enemy, while the main efforts of the army are directed against another portion of the hostile body.—Wagner.

(To be continued)